

Who Runs Wikipedia?

Wikimedia 2006 Elections

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[Vote for me](#) in the election for the Wikimedia Foundation's Board of Directors.

During Wikimania, I gave a short talk proposing some new features for Wikipedia. The audience, which consisted mostly of programmers and other high-level Wikipedians, immediately begun suggesting problems with the idea. "Won't bad thing X happen?" "How will you prevent Y?" "Do you really think people are going to do Z?" For a while I tried to answer them, explaining technical ways to fix the problem, but after a couple rounds I finally said:

Stop.

If I had come here five years ago and told you I was going to make an entire encyclopedia by putting up a bunch of web pages that anyone could edit, you would have been able to raise a thousand objections: It will get filled with vandalism! The content will be unreliable! No one will do that work for free!

And you would have been right to. These were completely reasonable expectations at the time. But here's the funny thing: it worked anyway.

At the time, I was just happy this quieted them down. But later I started thinking more about it. Why did Wikipedia work anyway?

It wasn't because its programmers were so far-sighted that the software solved all the problems. And it wasn't because the people running it put clear rules in place to prevent misbehavior. We know this because when Wikipedia started it didn't have any programmers (it used off-the-shelf wiki software) and it didn't have clear rules (one of the first major rules was apparently [ignore all rules](#)).

No, the reason Wikipedia works is because of the community, a group of people that took the project as their own and threw themselves into making it succeed.

People are constantly trying to vandalize Wikipedia, replacing articles with random text. It doesn't work; their edits are undone within minutes, even seconds. But why? It's not magic — it's a bunch of incredibly dedicated people who sit at their computers watching every change that gets made. These days they call themselves the "recent changes patrol" and have special software that makes it easy to undo bad changes and block malicious users with a couple clicks.

Why does anyone do such a thing? It's not particularly fascinating work, they're not being paid to do it, and nobody in charge asked them to volunteer. They do it because they care about the site enough to feel responsible. They get upset when someone tries to mess it up.

It's hard to imagine anyone feeling this way about *Britannica*. There are people who love that encyclopedia, but have any of them shown up at their offices offering to help out? It's hard even to imagine. Average people just don't feel responsible for *Britannica*; there are professionals to do that.

Everybody knows Wikipedia as the site anyone can edit. The article about tree frogs wasn't written because someone in charge decided they needed one and assigned it to someone; it was written because someone, somewhere just went ahead and started writing it. And a chorus of others decided to help out.

But what's less well-known is that it's also the site that anyone can run. The vandals aren't stopped because someone is in charge of stopping them; it was simply something people started doing. And it's not just vandalism: a "welcoming committee" says hi to every new user, a "cleanup taskforce" goes around doing factchecking. The site's rules are made by rough consensus. Even the servers are largely run this way — a group of volunteer sysadmins hang out on IRC, keeping an eye on things. Until quite recently, the Foundation that supposedly runs Wikipedia had no actual employees.

This is so unusual, we don't even have a word for it. It's tempting to say "democracy", but that's woefully inadequate. Wikipedia doesn't hold a vote and elect someone to be in charge of vandal-fighting. Indeed, "Wikipedia" doesn't do anything at all. Someone simply sees that there are vandals to be fought and steps up to do the job.

This is so radically different that it's tempting to see it as a mistake: Sure, perhaps things have worked so far on this model, but when the real problems hit, things are going to have to change: certain people must have clear authority, important tasks must be carefully assigned, everyone else must understand that they are simply volunteers.

But Wikipedia's openness isn't a mistake; it's the source of its success. A dedicated community solves problems that official leaders wouldn't even know were there. Meanwhile, their volunteerism largely eliminates infighting about who gets to be what. Instead, tasks get done by the people who genuinely want to do them, who just happen to be the people who care enough to do them right.

Wikipedia's biggest problems have come when it's strayed from this path, when it's given some people official titles and specified tasks. Whenever that happens, real work slows down and squabbling speeds up. But it's an easy mistake to make, so it gets made again and again.

Of course, that's not the only reason this mistake is made, it's just the most polite. The more frightening problem is that people love to get power and hate to give it up. Especially with a project as big and important as Wikipedia, with the constant swarm of praise and attention, it takes tremendous strength to turn down the opportunity to be its official X, to say instead "it's a community project, I'm just another community member".

Indeed, the opposite is far more common. People who have poured vast amounts of time into the project begin to feel they should be getting something in return. They insist that, with all their work, they *deserve* an official job or a special title. After all, won't clearly assigning tasks be better for everyone?

And so, the trend is clear: more power, more people, more problems. It's not just a series of mistakes, it's the tendency of the system.

It would be absurd for me to say that I'm immune to such pressures. After all, I'm currently running for a seat on the Wikimedia Board. But I also lie awake at night worrying that I might abuse my power.

A systemic tendency like this is not going to be solved by electing the right person to the right place and then going to back to sleep while they solve the problem. If the community wants to remain in charge, it's going to have to fight for it. I'm writing these essays to help people understand that this is something worth fighting for. And if I'm elected to the Board, I plan to keep on writing.

Just as Wikipedia's success as an encyclopedia requires a world of volunteers to write it, Wikipedia's success as an organization requires the community of volunteers to run it. On the one hand, this means opening up the Board's inner workings for the community to see and get involved in. But it also means opening up the actions of the community so the wider world can get involved. Whoever wins this next election, I hope we all take on this task.

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

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